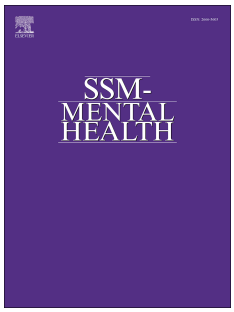
Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.



Languishing in critical perspective: Roots and routes of a traveling concept in COVID-19 times

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Title: “Languishing in Critical Perspective: Roots and Routes of a Traveling Concept in COVID-19 Times”

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"Languishing in Critical Perspective:
Roots and Routes of a Traveling Concept in COVID-19 Times"

For some reason, I feel like languishing means I should wear a fancy dressing robe and recline on a velvet chaise, gazing through a giant window at an English garden. But I'm not. I go to work, come home, take care of cats and chores, read the news, get my stuff ready for work the next day, and go to sleep. I can't even languish right.

- machine operator in her 50s in Kansas

In April 2021, as the COVID-19 pandemic entered its second year, the *New York Times* published an article offering readers a name for the pandemic's negative impact on mental health and well-being: "languishing." Originally developed by positive psychologists interested in disentangling the dynamics of mental *health* from those of mental *illness* (Keyes, 2002),[1] the concept is reinterpreted in the newspaper article, penned by organizational psychologist Adam Grant, for a broad audience (2021b). Languishing, he writes, stands at the midpoint between "depression" and "flourishing." It is "the neglected middle child of mental health"—and, quite possibly, "the dominant emotion of 2021." Grant's article attracted a wide readership and over 1,300 reader comments. A wave of follow-up conversation ensued in print, radio, and electronic media[2]—including a July 2021 TED talk by the author that garnered 2.5 million views in its first

[1] Keyes distinguishes between two separate endeavors: "prevent and treat cases of mental illness," on one hand, and "understand how to promote flourishing in individuals otherwise free of mental illness but not mentally healthy," on the other (Keyes, 2007, 2002).
[2] See, for instance, (Abrams, 2021; Neuhaus, 2021; Organ, 2021; Simon, 2021; Young and McMahon, 2021).

six months online (Grant, 2021a). As the year drew to a close, Grant's essay was declared "The most-read New York Times story of 2021" (NYT staff, 2021).

How can we explain the strong popular appeal of the idea of "languishing" during this tense moment of unfolding global crisis? What kinds of personal and cultural "work" (Obeyesekere, 1990; see also Hollan, 1994; Chapin, 2008) might it facilitate? And what happens when a psychological concept becomes unmoored from its origins and taken up as a popular idea and explanatory frame? How might it change in the process? In this brief article, I engage these questions by tracing one episode in the social life of "languishing" as it traveled swiftly from the academic field of positive psychology into U.S. popular discourse near an early pandemic peak in the U.S.

Building on medical and psychological anthropological scholarship on other traveling "psy" (i.e., psychological or psychiatric) concepts—for instance, contemporary notions of depression (Behrouzan, 2016; Kitanaka, 2012), anxiety (Zhang, 2020), trauma (Abramowitz, 2014; Alexander, 2004; Erikson, 1995; Lewis, 2019), and schizophrenia (Jenkins, 2015; Metzl, 2009), as well as older categories like neurasthenia (Kleinman, 1982), hysteria (Gilman et al., 1993), and madness (Reyes-Foster, 2018)—the article engages three principal themes. First, it explores how the idea of languishing entered public discourse and, for some, proved useful as a way of narrativizing (Kirmayer, 2000; Mattingly, 1998; Mattingly et al., 2008; Mattingly and Garro, 2000)—i.e., naming and framing—the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their everyday lives and emotional landscapes. Like other psychological and psychiatric concepts, the notion of languishing has become vernacularized as it travels, accruing different kinds of meaning, value, and cultural significance as it becomes detached from its scholarly origins. As a second and related aim, the article considers some of the emerging cultural valences and interpretive dynamics of this newly circulating concept. Finally, it reflects critically on the gaps and discrepancies between what positive psychologists and ordinary people mean when they use the term and considers some of the stakes and implications of these differences.

The principal aim of this article is not to elevate one understanding of "languishing" over another, but rather to explore both the definitional slippage and the cultural work that take place when psychological and psychiatric concepts glide out of the academy and into the public sphere. Yet in closing, I pull back from questions of discourse and meaning-making to raise a different kind of question that demands attention moving forward: What does it mean to suggest that "everyone is languishing," as the *NY Times* article implies, precisely at a moment when the profoundly uneven mental health consequences of a global pandemic are becoming increasingly clear?

METHODS

To address these questions, this essay analyzes a set of online weekly journals (n=30) created between May 2020 and September 2021 in which journalers mentioned the word "languish" or "languishing" in reflecting on the social, emotional, material, and existential reverberations of COVID-19 in their lives. These journals were created as part of the Pandemic Journaling Project (PJP), an online journaling platform and research study, launched in May 2020, which I created together with Katherine A. Mason and an interdisciplinary team of researchers and students. We designed PJP as a digital space where anyone in the world (age 15 or older) could chronicle the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in their lives and, at the same time, preserve their experience in a historical archive (see (Wurtz et al., this issue; Willen et al, 2020)). By May 2022, nearly 1,850 people in 55 countries had contributed nearly 27,000 journal entries in writing, audio, and/or photographs. The majority of entries contributed via PJP's bilingual English and Spanish interface are in English, with a smaller number in Spanish and a handful in other languages, including Portuguese and Chinese. While the PJP archive was not designed to involve a representative sample, it does include a significant amount of demographic diversity in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity, educational level, and other factors (Wurtz et al., this issue, Table 1).

The journals analyzed for this paper comprise a narrower subset of the overall PJP dataset (see Table 1). Of the participants represented here, a handful had been contributing journal entries to PJP for fewer than four weeks when the dataset was created in September 2021. Most, however, had contributed for 11 weeks or more, including six who had been journaling for over 60 weeks by that point (see Table 2). Nearly all journalers in this subset identified as women holding a college degree or higher. Most lived in the United States, with one each in Canada, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. Journalers ranged in age from under 30 to over 70, with reported household incomes ranging from under US$30,000 to over US$150,000 per year. Most identified as white, with two each identifying as "Asian or Asian-American" and "Hispanic or Latino," including one who identified as Latino and white. The demographics of this subset correspond roughly to those of PJP overall, with a few notable differences: members of this subgroup were more likely to identify as women (97% vs. 80% in the overall sample), white (80% vs. 49%), and highly educated (93% with a BA or higher vs. 61%). In addition, they tended to be older with 10% under 30 (vs. 25%) and 40% over 60 (vs. 16%).

Analysis began by reading all individual journal entries in which languishing was mentioned and, using NVivo, open coding to identify key themes. The term appeared in 30 journals, which were then analyzed in full, again open coding to identify themes and patterns, and to clarify where invocations of languishing fit into journalers' overall accounts of their pandemic experiences. In addition, journals were analyzed in conjunction with participants' biweekly responses to quantitative survey questions about their mental and emotional health.[3]

[3] For the full survey instrument, see the supplement to (Wurtz et al, this issue).

	Full Sample	
	#	%
Gender		
Male, 18+	1	3%
Female, 18+	29	97%
Other, 18+	0	0%
Age		
20-29	3	10%
30-39	4	13%
40-49	4	13%
50-59	5	17%
60-69	6	20%
70 or older	6	20%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	24	80%
Hispanic/Latino	2	7%
Asian-American/Pacific Islander	2	7%
Unknown	3	10%
Education		
Some college	2	7%
Bachelor or associate degree	11	37%
Graduate degree	17	57%
HH Income		
Less than $50,000	8	27%
$50,000-$99,999	8	27%
$100,000-$149,999	6	20%
$150,000+	5	17%
Don't know/prefer not to say	3	10%
Total		100%

Table 1 - Journalers' demographic characteristics (self-reported).

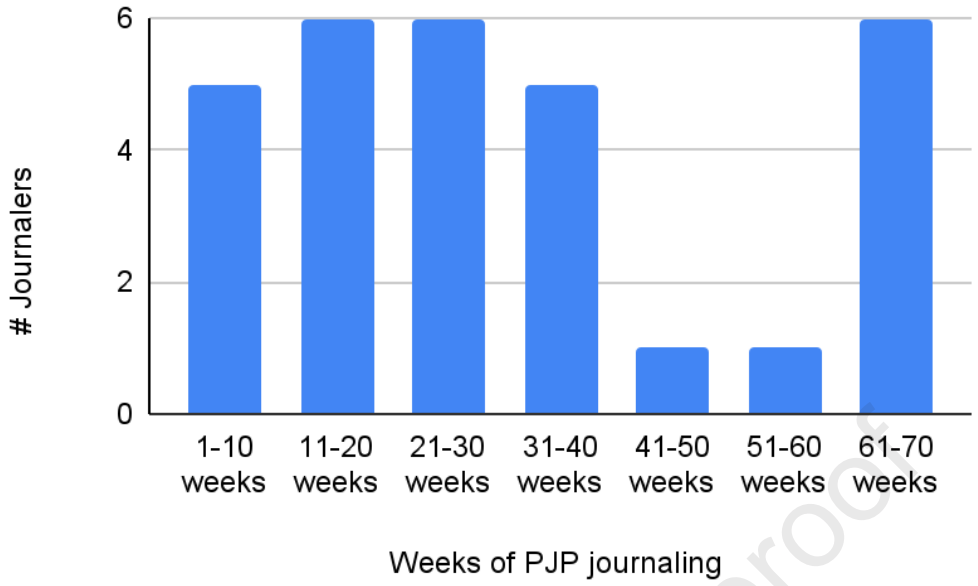

Table 2 - Frequency of journalers' participation in the Pandemic Journaling Project, in weeks.

LANGUISHING: THE RESEARCH CONSTRUCT

Before turning to the journals themselves, it is first helpful to clarify how languishing has been defined and operationalized in the field of positive psychology. Importantly, and unlike terms like depression and anxiety, languishing is not a clinical or diagnostic term. It is not viewed as a mental disorder per se, and it appears nowhere in the leading diagnostic manuals (e.g., the DSM-V and ICD-10). Rather, it is an analytic construct used by research psychologists to classify people according to quantitative responses to survey items, and to explore associations at the population level, typically using large-scale studies or existing data sets. In these population-level analyses, the construct of languishing is used to capture the "absence of *mental* health" and related limitations in social and emotional functioning, including associations "with poor *emotional* health, with high limitations of daily living, and with a high likelihood of a severe number (i.e., 6 or more) of lost days of work" (Keyes, 2002, p. 217; emphasis added). In

addition to these limitations on *psychosocial* functioning, languishing also is associated with a cluster of (quantitatively measured) affective sensations, including "feelings of emptiness, stagnation, feeling hollow" (Hefferon, 2013, p. 4).

In his piece for the *NY Times*, Grant—who is a research psychologist as opposed to a clinician—glosses these definitions in simple and accessible terms with a personalized, clinical spin. "In psychology," he explains, "we think about mental health on a spectrum from depression to flourishing. Flourishing is the peak of well-being: You have a strong sense of meaning, mastery and mattering to others. Depression is the valley of ill-being: You feel despondent, drained and worthless" (2021b). In between is languishing, "the void between depression and flourishing—the absence of well-being" (ibid.)

Despite Grant's characterization of languishing as a "void" between categories, population-level analyses do suggest strong associations between the analytic construct of languishing and diagnoses of depression. In a nationally representative U.S. survey, for instance, adults who scored as "languishing" were twice as likely to have experienced a major depressive episode in the past 12 months as people with "moderate mental health," and six times as likely as those who scored as "flourishing" (Keyes, 2002, p. 207). On the basis of such findings, positive psychologists stake claims to clinical relevance, concluding for instance that "languishing might be as debilitating as major depression" (Hefferon, 2013, p. 5), citing (Keyes, 2002); see also (Keyes, 2007)).

Another area of languishing research hinges on the creation of statistical categories of "languishers" and "flourishers" based on quantitative survey data (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2016; Wissing et al., 2021) and investigation of systematic differences between the two groups. For instance, Wissing and colleagues suggest—in a manner that risks reification of analytic categories—that "languishers" tend to be motivated by "hedonic values such as [their] own happiness" and show "an inward subjective focus, orientated towards personal need fulfillment

and personal well-being." "Flourishers," they continue, tend to express "eudaimonic orientations, such as doing things for the greater good" (Wissing et al., 2021, pp. 598–99).

Do everyday understandings of languishing accord with these quantitative assessments? What should we make of languishing's non-diagnostic status—from an experiential, therapeutic, and/or policy standpoint? As the qualitative findings presented below suggest, the slipperiness of this concept, like that of other "psy" terms that travel, may involve hidden risks that demand scrutiny.

LANGUISHING AS LIVED EXPERIENCE

Let us now turn to the voices of PJP journalers themselves, and to the travels and translational dynamics of this psychological term during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of particular interest here is the kind of "work"—individual/subjective as well as collective/cultural—that the concept of languishing appears ready to support. The notion of "work," borrowing here from Obeyesekere, involves the "work of culture": "the process whereby symbolic forms existing on the cultural level get created and recreated through the minds of people" (1990, p. xix). As Hollan explains, Obeyesekere's "concept of 'work' is analytically useful for several reasons"—including the fact that "it focuses our attention on how specific individuals *use* cultural beliefs and symbols to make sense of their experience (Hollan 1988b, 1989)" (1994, p. 74; emphasis in original). Examining the cultural work accomplished by the notion of languishing can help us understand not only how "psy" concepts become both "sticky" and polyvalent in a particular sociocultural setting and historical moment, but also the "political economy of idea circulation"[4] more broadly.

Learning about Languishing

[4] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this felicitous phrase, and for the invitation to put the concept of languishing in dialogue with Obeyesekere's classic work.

Most journalers in this subset of PJP journals used the terms “languish” or “languishing” in a manner more or less consistent with the explanation offered in the *NY Times*. One third specifically mentioned that venue, which itself is unsurprising for a rather unusual reason: the Pandemic Journaling Project itself was the focus of a full-page *NY Times* article in February 2021 (Carey, 2021), leading to a wave of both subsequent media attention[5] and, notably, new project participants.

A retired university administrator in her 60s in New Jersey, for instance, explained that, “The New York Times recently ran a piece about ‘languishing’. Apparently I'm not the only one not flourishing.” Others were less precise in pinpointing where they had encountered the term, among them a university professor in her 50s in Connecticut who mentioned “an article that said the word for what we were all feeling was ‘languishing’ and I thought, yeah, that’s about right.” A recent college graduate in her 20s in Illinois similarly “read an article this week about ‘languishing,’ a kind of in-between, not-happy not-sad feeling that seems to be dominating a lot of people's mental state throughout the pandemic. I have been having that languishing feeling especially strongly this week for some reason.”

Some journalers encountered the term indirectly, including a Canadian church leader in her 40s who heard it in the online “Covid Wellness Group” she had been leading at her church for over a year: “So many folks feeling so much. Languishing was the word offered today. I think it was on the news or something but when it was mentioned, there was a large response from those on the zoom screen. People are reallllllly tiring of all of this.”

Articulating Distress

In most cases, journalers invoked the term as a way of articulating their own intense feelings and, in some cases, the feelings of those around them as well. A retired educator in her

[5] See https://pandemic-journaling-project.chip.uconn.edu/media-2-3/.

60s in Connecticut appears to have looked up a dictionary definition upon encountering the word: “Languishing. I finally heard a word to help describe my feelings. Languid (adj): without vigor or vitality. Languish (vi) to become weak or droop; to long or to pine. Yes, that term helps to define where I am at this point.” A retired IT professional in her 60s in Oregon wrote that, “My moods are all over the place—mainly, a cloud of mild depression over everything. Interesting article a friend sent, discussing 'languishing'—seems to fit.” And the machine operator in Kansas explained that, “Emotionally, I am ‘languishing.’ I think it was a New York Times article that described it as a state between depression and enthusiasm.”

For her, among others, the term served as a richly evocative metaphor, but not necessarily in a helpful way. Recall the image it conjured for her, introduced in the opening to this essay: a fancy dressing robe, a velvet chaise, an English garden—and a sense of failure (“I can’t even languish right”). Similarly, a Massachusetts woman in her 50s explained that she is “definitely ‘languishing’,” noting that “The medical professionals chose the perfect word to describe it.” Yet for her, the term evoked a different image altogether: “Played out, with no definite end in sight. My motivation for my job is down to about nil. And I like my job. It's hard to keep caring though, when life is stagnant. Mosquitoes will start breeding in it.” For these journalers, the concept of languishing took on a discursive life of its own, tapping into personal imaginings that strayed far from the tightly operationalized construct designed by researchers with measurement as their goal. In the journal entries, we glimpse the term’s generative capacity as a “fragment of poetic thought” (Kirmayer, 2000) that can evoke metaphoric associations and put lived experience in dialogue with entirely different images, symbols, and narrative frames, some deeply personal and others widely shared.

What Languishing Feels Like

As the concept of languishing enters the public sphere, many features of the positive psychology definition are nonetheless retained: lack of motivation, exhaustion and fatigue,

feelings of hollowness and emptiness. An underemployed chaplain in her 30s in the U.K., for instance, also felt her motivation had taken a nosedive as a result of the pandemic: “Needless to say, it's not going well. I just feel like a sloth with no motivations.” And yet, like most others who used the term, she does not fit the description of someone who is “inwardly focused” on her own happiness and well-being to the neglect of others’. Elsewhere in her journal, she wrote at length about her many concerns: for family and friends near and far, for her new marriage, for her career and her ability to put her skills as an educator and pastoral counselor to good use.

A woman in her 20s in Portugal similarly registered deep concern for others while simultaneously articulating her own sense of languishing. She was grateful that her parents had recovered quickly after contracting COVID-19, but lamented that, “It has been hard to go through the days. I absolutely lack motivation to do daily tasks in my job, which makes me tired due to the mental load I accumulate. I procrastinate during the day and often end up working at night, which makes me even more tired due to the physical effort. I miss having hobbies. I miss having energy. I miss having purpose.”

Another common theme involved feelings of being trapped or stuck, sometimes in an inescapable cycle. For the retired IT professional, “It's the most odd feeling—as if I am energized, but also can't move—like an engine at 2000 rpm, with the emergency brake on, or the transmission in 'PARK'.” The underemployed chaplain described herself as “just going through the motions. Somehow it is always Thursday again. Time is moving away, and nothing is changing.” For a retired software engineer in her 60s in Maryland, “the image that best represents how I feel now is of living through a wave that rises and crashes down on me and upends my life. I’m submerged and being rolled around with no way of saving myself. Then just as I feel I’ve adequately recovered after the most recent wave has passed, another wave is approaching and it all starts over again.”

Languishing, Loneliness, and Luck

Social isolation, loneliness, and disconnection from others were particularly prominent themes in this subset of journals, especially in the period before vaccines were widely available, when much of the globe was still in lockdown. For a graduate student in her mid 20s who lived on her own in an apartment in Illinois, for instance, the pandemic quickly became deeply isolating: “I have become really consumed with loneliness. To combat the problem, I have periodically spent a week or so back at home with my parents. This helps to an extent … But what I'm really longing for is connection with people my own age.” She explained how even a glimmer of social interaction could make an enormous difference: “I had a three-minute conversation with the nurse who gave me my vaccine earlier this week, and even just that little bit of interaction with a stranger boosted my mood for hours afterward. I realized that I have not interacted with anyone outside my family and a few close friends for months.” As Parsons (in press; see also (Granovetter, 1973)) suggests, everyday interactions involving ”weak ties” and casual interactions like this one can have a significant impact on mental health and well-being. For many, the disappearance of such opportunities during periods of COVID lockdown contributed to a palpable sense of both isolation and loneliness.

For some journalers, experiences of languishing—understood in terms of fatigue, loss of motivation, emptiness, stuckness, and loneliness—co-occurred with a strong sense of gratitude, and sometimes an accompanying sense of guilt. For instance, the retired educator in Connecticut explained that, “I've pushed through months of the pandemic using extra energy to be positive, and it has worked. I've supported friends and family and have found ways to brighten each day. … The cup is half full in so many ways, yet I still long for my usual enthusiasm and energy.” Similarly, a Connecticut university professor described “a sense of hollow existing with no real joy,” explaining that,

> I try to remind myself all the time that I am so lucky because I never got sick, my family and friends never got sick, I had a job I could do from home and financially we did not have to struggle. … intellectually [I] know I have nothing to complain about but honestly

> inside I just feel empty, like I'm trapped in place and there is nothing to hold onto that means much to me right now.

For these journalers, as for numerous other PJP participants, the pandemic tipped many aspects of everyday life off-kilter—feelings, energy level, relationships, one's sense of time and space, one's sense of self and purpose—even without losing any loved ones to, or ever testing positive for, COVID-19.

VERNACULARIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The richly textured journal entries analyzed here shed light on a significant moment in the social and cultural life of the concept of "languishing" near an early peak in the U.S.'s encounter with COVID-19. In that moment, the concept was entering popular discourse as a common-sense way of explaining the deeply disruptive, painful, and distressing reverberations of the pandemic in journalers' own lives and on those around them. For some, the term also took on meaning as a way of discursively capturing a broader sense of collective "mood" (Throop, 2022, 2017).

The Value of Naming and Framing

Several things become clear as we dive into the role languishing plays in the PJP journals analyzed here. First, journalers provide illustrative glimpses of the subjective feelings and sensations that coalesced around this concept in a moment of profound global crisis. In their words, associations, and metaphors, we hear how they, like so many others around the globe, struggled to make sense of an unfolding disaster whose scope, scale, and implications were unprecedented in their lifetimes. We hear real-time reflections on what it is like, and how stressful it can be, to be stuck in a state some psychologists and anthropologists describe as "subjunctivity"—a sense of living in the middle of an unfolding story, but without knowing which story, or perhaps even which kind of story, one is in ((Bruner, 1986; Good, 1994; Good et al.,

1994; Whyte, 2002); see also (Lang, 2020; Wolf-Meyer and Callahan-Kapoor, 2017)). Are we in a joyful story or a tragic one? Near the beginning, middle, or end? Or is the plot still unfolding, the dramatic tension still rising?

Second, we see how under uncertain, "subjunctive" conditions, journals themselves can become a space not only to vent emotions and chronicle the everyday, but also to corral the messiness of everyday lived experience—ranging from major milestones to the most mundane details of quotidian life—into some semblance of narrative form. We see how the idea of languishing can become helpful as a way to *name* and *frame* the rupture created by the pandemic in the world as a whole, and in individuals' lives in particular. Journalers occasionally expressed an explicit sense of relief, or even gratitude, in stumbling upon the term, like the retired educator in Connecticut who "finally heard a word to help describe my feelings."

For some journalers, the social and relational qualities of the term themselves were especially important. Languishing crops up as a "word for what we were all feeling," as one put it, or that prompted "a large response from those on the zoom screen," according to another. We learn how the notion of languishing can circulate via social channels—as a resource passed among friends, or shared in a virtual church group. And we see how within these everyday spaces of communication and connection, the idea can help create tendrils of identification, connection, and perhaps even community among those who find in it a meaningful way of naming distress.

Languishing as a Cultural Resource

As these invocations of the term make clear, the notion of languishing has begun to hold value not only as at the individual level, but also in broader, collective terms—at least for some in the U.S.—as a new "cultural resource" (Kirmayer, 2000)—or a new tool in a "communal toolkit" (Bruner, 1986)—for creating meaning and narrative order out of experiential disorder (Mattingly, 1998; Mattingly and Garro, 2000).

What does it mean to describe languishing as a cultural resource? First, the journal entries analyzed here remind us of the profoundly idiosyncratic, and irrepressibly metaphorical, qualities of language itself. For some, the circulating term simply feels 'right.' It can be narratively tried on for size in the anonymous space of an online journal, perhaps with a borrowed gloss or a dictionary definition tucked in for confirmation and context. For others, the term activates a personal association, or web of associations, that lends narrative scaffolding to unfamiliar, and unwelcome, emotional dynamics: A scene evoking a 19th century Romantic novel, albeit with something amiss. A stagnant pool that invites breeding mosquitoes. A malfunctioning car spinning in overdrive.

In these subjective forms of cultural "work," the sociocultural origins of the concept itself matter. Here we must remember not only its ivory tower origins, but also its path into the domain of public discourse: via a newspaper article in a national paper whose target readership is significantly older, more highly educated, wealthier, and whiter than the nation for which it purports to be the newspaper of record. After the article's publication, the term gained even wider circulation through a subsequent TED talk studded with personal anecdotes about the author's own pandemic experiences and those of his family and friends—anecdotes that reflect a set of sociocultural coordinates close to those of the *NY Times'* modal readers. This path into the public domain points toward several key questions: For whom do Grant's diagnosis—or, for that matter, his prescription—resonate as comfortable and familiar narrative frames? Whose cultural worldview might them best reflect—and whose might they occlude, exclude, or simply fail to capture?

Given this discursive trajectory, it comes as no surprise that the concept of languishing seems to have caught on, at least initially, among those likely to be cushioned by privilege from COVID's worst effects. Yet it is not necessarily divorced from the lived struggles of those facing disadvantage and heightened risk. A public health researcher in her 30s in California, for instance, reveals how this term—like other "psy" concepts in other times and places—can evoke

the damage wrought by social and political inequities on society's core structures and institutions, and on the global political economy writ large. She characterizes her own experience of languishing in terms of "grief and rage [that] goes in waves," noting explicitly that these powerful feelings include her rage at the U.S. Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention (CDC) for easing masking requirements before it felt safe. Writing "as a person of color who has taken the pandemic very seriously this entire time," she anticipated that, "this new direction from the CDC is only going to exacerbate disparities in COVID-19 infections and death. This new policy change will hurt communities of color, especially families like my own who are comprised of mostly essential workers and whose family has been significantly impacted by COVID-19."

Like the idioms of anxiety in China (Zhang, 2020), *depreshen* in Iran (Behrouzan, 2016), and trauma in Liberia (Abramowitz, 2014), among other possible examples, the vernacular idiom of languishing can thus signal powerful interconnections among subjective and broader collective concerns and perform meaningful, often highly particular forms of cultural "work." Such signals of entwinement remind us how the vernacularization of "psy" idioms can prove double-edged. On one hand, they may create important opportunities to confront, narrativize, and potentially heal from—or even actively destigmatize—mental distress. On the other hand, however, we must pay attention to, and be wary of, potential gaps, elisions, or slippages between analytic and everyday understandings. In this case, for instance, research psychologists' analytic construct of languishing takes a tight internal and psychological focus. This focus may fail to recognize how the "work of culture" can have healing or therapeutic potential. Importantly, it may also obscure or distract from the broader social, political, or economic origins of distress.

Diagnosing languishing?

The nature of this analytic construct also may blind us to the "work" of *biomedical* culture, which has a tendency to medicalize suffering in ways that can distort, mislead, and even cause harm (see (Fox, 2005; Good et al., 2003; Kleinman, 1996) as well as (Obeyesekere, 1985)). Of course the possibility that languishing might lead to the unwelcome medicalization of distress is a curious one since, as mentioned earlier, it is neither a diagnostic nor a clinical category. Unlike other "psy" concepts with vernacular social lives—anxiety, depression, and trauma, for instance—languishing originates in the world of population-level research rather than a field of clinical practice. In popular discourse, the gaps between scholarly, clinical, and popular conceptions of languishing disappear, with varying effects. Recall, for instance, the journaler in Massachusetts who writes gratefully that, "The medical professionals chose the perfect word to describe it."

Here we might wonder: Would those who describe themselves as languishing fit diagnostic criteria for depression or other forms of mental illness, as some studies suggest (Hefferon, 2013; Keyes, 2007, 2002)? While PJP was not designed to test the degree of fit between different "emic" and "etic" understandings of languishing, the project's mixed-methods design does point toward one meaningful insight: journalers' in this subsample reported widely ranging states of mental health at the time they invoked the term. In the week they used it, fewer than half rated their mental or emotional health as "fair" or "poor"—and, in fact, over half rated their mental or emotional health as "good," "very good," or "excellent." While these data must be interpreted with caution, we are left with the hypothesis that strong cultural resonance in a community sample is not the same as predictive or diagnostic value in clinical terms.

CONCLUSION: LANGUISHING IN CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

In moments of collective crisis, psychological and psychiatric concepts often hold appeal in individual and collective struggles to name, if not diagnose, subjective experiences of distress. This article has explored how one such concept—the construct of languishing

developed by positive psychologists—entered the domain of public discourse in early 2021 and came to serve as a meaningful cultural resource for some people who were struggling to name and frame the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in their lifeworlds and, in some cases, in their communities more broadly. The online COVID-19 journals analyzed here provide insight into the "stickiness" of this newly popularized term, and they show how some people found it valuable as a cultural and personal resource in their own meaning-making efforts. In some cases, naming one's experience as languishing helped contextualize unwelcome changes in mood or mental state, or name hard-to-articulate sensations. For many, it had the added benefit of affirming that they were not alone in their struggles to maintain an even keel in the wake of COVID-related disruption, risk, fear, and grief.

In broader terms, analysis of these journals helps clarify what can happen when a "psy" concept becomes unmoored from its origins as an operationalized research construct and begins to accrue new forms of narrative and cultural meaning. We see how psy concepts can take on figurative and metaphorical qualities as they travel, and how they can activate personal memories, associations, and motives for sociocultural or political critique. In such instances, psy terms can be (re)invented as "cultural resources" with the capacity not only to help narrativize distress, whether individual or collective. At times, they may also help bolster efforts to name and confront injustice.

An analytic focus on the cultural work facilitated by the concept of languishing can also help us map, and interrogate, the political economy of psychological ideas—in this case, of an idea with origins in a field that seeks explicitly to connect with popular audiences. Looking forward, and as this newly popularized concept gathers momentum, it will be important to track, historicize, and critique its travels, much like other positive psychology concepts such as "happiness" (Ehrenreich, 2010; Horowitz, 2018) and "flourishing" (Willen, 2022). These are not just intellectual exercises, nor are they tasks we can relegate to intellectual historians of the future. We must begin now to think critically about the particular appeal of this term, the

unspoken assumptions it entails, and—in particular—the role it may end up playing in our collective search for both clinical and policy solutions to the massive mental health burden imposed by COVID-19, now and into the future.

The appeal of this concept raises an urgent question: What might be the risk, or even danger, in suggesting that everyone is languishing, as the *NY Times* piece seems to imply, precisely when the differential impact of the pandemic is becoming increasingly clear? We can best answer this question by returning to Grant's definition of languishing as "the void between depression and flourishing"—and to the remedy he proposes. Like the concept itself, his proposed antidote is drawn from positive psychology, a field that looks to behavior change as the locus of intervention for efforts to improve well-being. One can combat languishing, he suggests, by pursuing activities involving "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), understood as "that elusive state of absorption … where your sense of time, place and self melts away" (Grant, 2021b). He offers an array of suggestions that are deeply particular—to his sociocultural coordinates, if not his personal biography—even as they are presented as holding universal utility: puzzles, word games, meaningful conversations, uninterrupted work time. In the wake of this widely read article, the *NY Times* leaned even further into positive psychology "solutions" to the urgent "problem" of languishing by publishing an online "flourishing quiz" along with an article outlining steps individuals can take to promote their own flourishing ((Blum, 2021); see also (VanderWeele, 2019)). This series of journalistic moves propelled both languishing and, to a lesser extent, flourishing into circulation as cultural models for thinking about mental health and well-being in the long wake of COVID-19 and beyond.

From the medical anthropology standpoint advanced in this article and in this collection more broadly, these moves, and the psychological concepts they advance, urgently demand critical scrutiny for various reasons—above all because they sidestep broader questions about why some people are more likely to languish, and others more likely to flourish, in the first place. In this post-Trump, late pandemic moment, we are seeing a strong wave of interest in the

possibility that research constructs from positive psychology might offer compelling answers to 'wicked' policy problems in the domains of both individual and population-level health (Templeton World Charity Foundation, 2021, 2020; VanderWeele, 2017; VanderWeele et al., 2019). This wave of interest is accruing massive research investment, and it will likely have powerful implications for health research and policy in the years to come. Yet it harbors troubling blind spots including, above all, a worrying inattention to the ways in which structure, power, and inequity affect who gets to flourish, who is likely to languish, and who our social structures and institutions, as currently designed, will—and will not—help recover from hardship (Willen 2022; Willen et al 2022; Cele et al 2022).

From this standpoint, one take-home is clear. A focus on "languishing," with the pursuit of "flow" as proposed antidote, may well help some *NY Times* readers cope with pandemic experiences—as may journaling, either on one's own or with an online platform like PJP. Yet individual-level behavioral interventions are a risky bet if our broader goal is to confront the root causes of today's profound and wide-reaching mental health burden—a burden that may not have been precipitated, but certainly has been exacerbated—by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

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Tables and Figures for

**"Languishing in Critical Perspective:
Roots and Routes of a Traveling Concept in COVID-19 Times"**

Table 1 - Journalers' demographic characteristics.

	Full Sample	
	#	%
Gender		
Male, 18+	1	3%
Female, 18+	29	97%
Other, 18+	0	0%
Age		
20-29	3	10%
30-39	4	13%
40-49	4	13%
50-59	5	17%
60-69	6	20%
70 or older	6	20%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	24	80%
Hispanic/Latino	2	7%
Asian-American/Pacific Islander	2	7%
Unknown	3	10%
Education		
Some college	2	7%
Bachelor or associate degree	11	37%
Graduate degree	17	57%
HH Income		
Less than $50,000	8	27%
$50,000-$99,999	8	27%
$100,000-$149,999	6	20%
$150,000+	5	17%
Don't know/prefer not to say	3	10%
Total		100%

Table 2 - Frequency of journalers' participation in the Pandemic Journaling Project, in weeks.

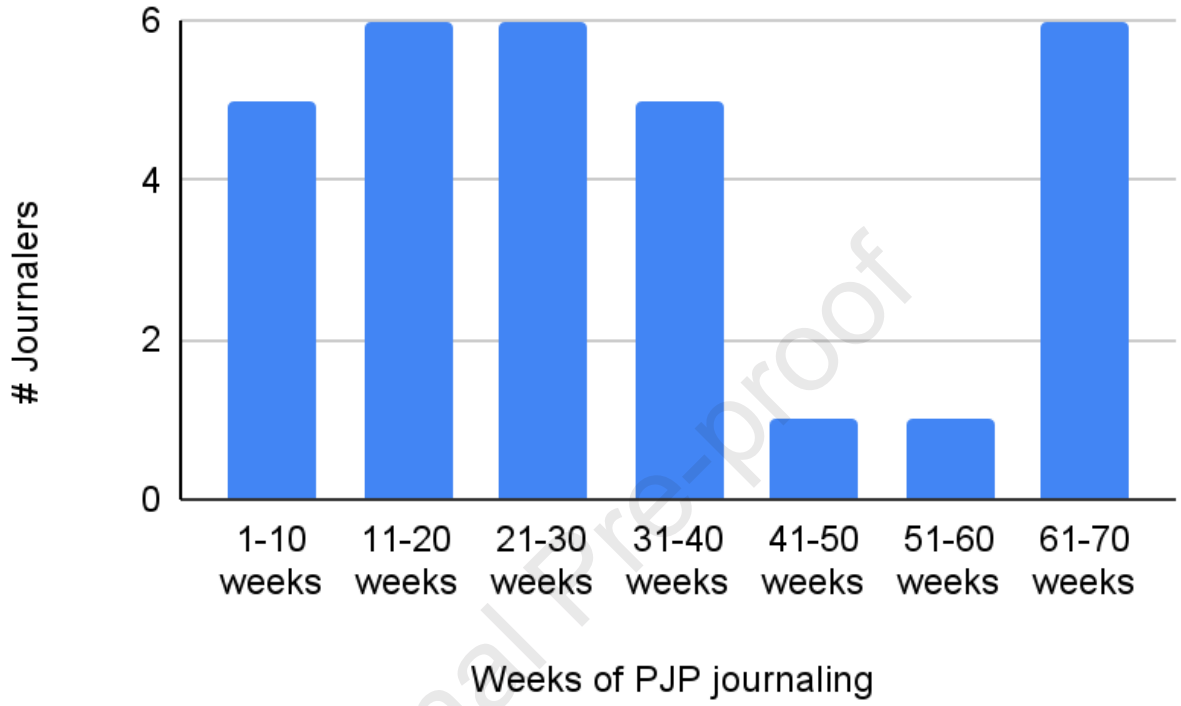
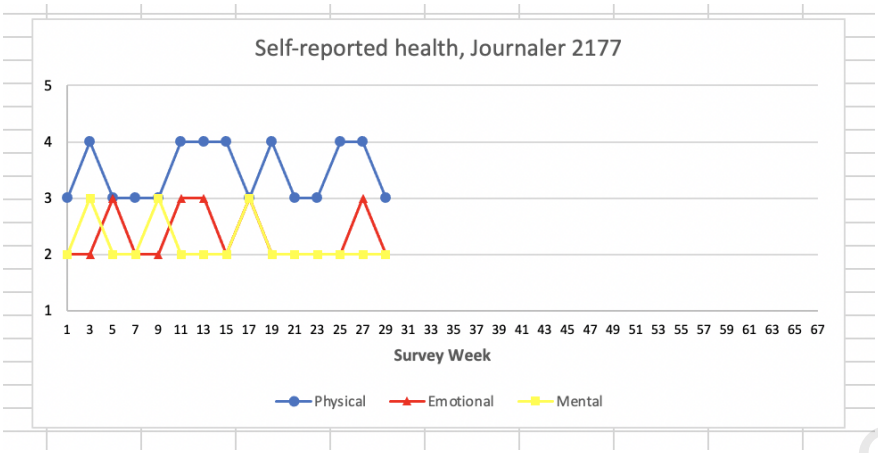
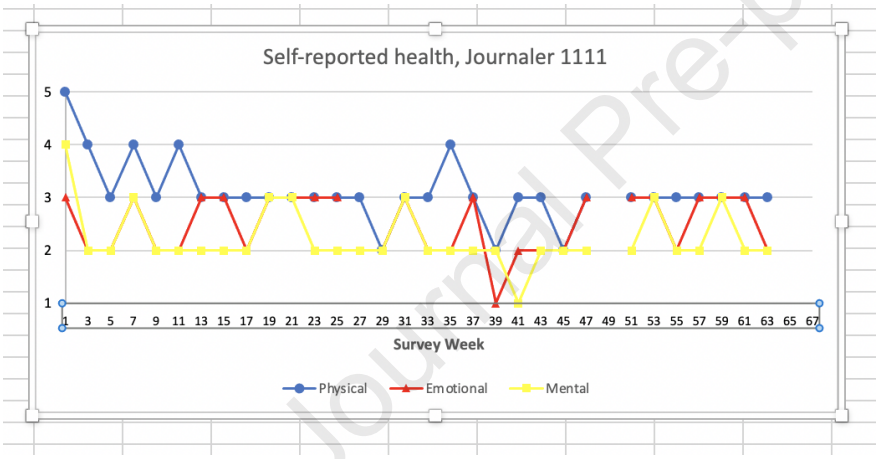


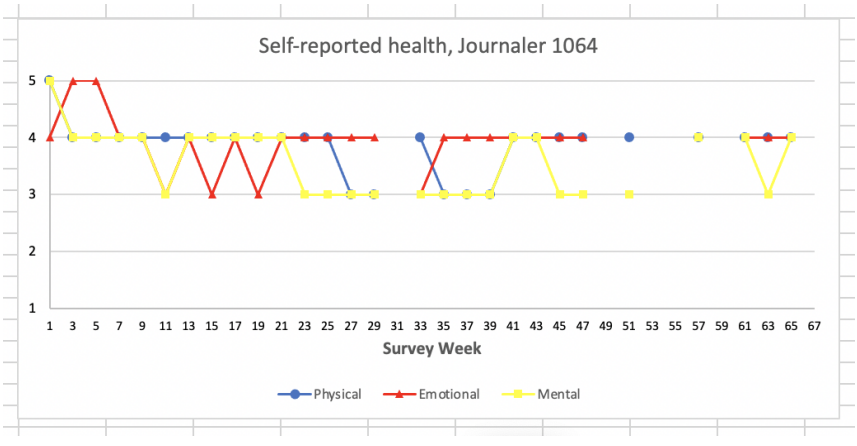
Figure 1 – Biweekly responses to health questions: Three examples



i. The machine operator



ii. The underemployed chaplain



iii. The retired educator

Declaration of interests

☒ The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

☐ The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: